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United Nations

Advancing women's leadership in
dryland regions through the three Rs:

Rights, Representation and Resources



*A nurturing community of
practice for dryland women*



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Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda will become an epitaph for a world that might have been.

António Guterres,
Secretary-General of the United Nations

Many women, especially in developing countries, rely heavily on environment-linked livelihoods such as agriculture, forest management and silvopastoral systems. Due to this reliance on natural landscapes, women are disproportionately affected by climate change. When combined with their disadvantaged socio-economic status and limited access to resources, information and decision-making power (UNCCD, 2022b), gender disparities are further widened.

In dryland regions in particular, women have acquired unique knowledge of agroforestry and biodiversity conservation through their environment-related income activities. (FAO, 2022). They are often forced to adapt to climatic changes and, in some cases, have developed location-specific and gender-just solutions to increase their communities' resilience. Empowering women to unleash their expertise and amplify their role in decision-making could be a game-changer, delivering widespread societal gains in the field of climate adaptation.

This policy brief offers decision-makers and practitioners a condensed overview of local, promising practices in this field and advocates for actions based on the 'three Rs': i.e. actions that enhance **rights**, bolster **representation** and harness **resources**. These actions have the potential to fast-track progress and social change, propelling the global community towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a better life for all.

If current trends continue, it will take more than four decades to close the gender gap in national parliamentary representation and three decades to do so at the local level, and more than 140 years to achieve gender parity in managerial positions (UN, 2023).

Think globally and act locally

Land degradation and drought in dryland areas adversely affect livelihoods. An estimated 55 million people globally are directly affected by droughts every year (WHO, 2021), and women and children are disproportionately affected (UNCCD, 2022a). To fulfill many of the SDGs, including SDGs 5 and 15, a fundamental shift is required in how women are recognized for their contributions to climate change solutions.

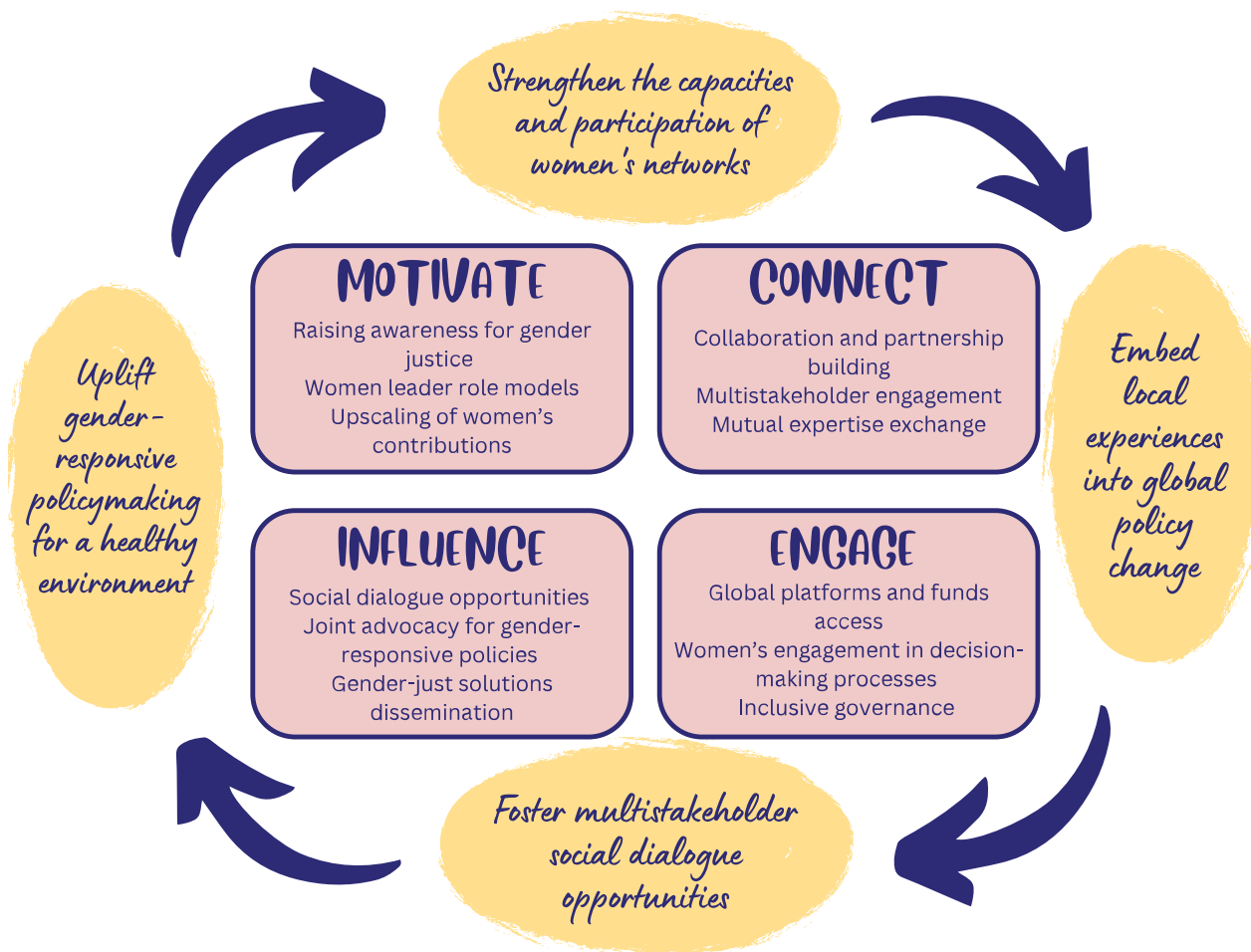
Despite various initiatives to promote women's rights, including the landmark 2017 [UNFCCC Gender Action Plan](#), women's representation in politics and land governance in dryland areas is still weak. In some countries where women face more severe discrimination, it remains just a faraway dream. These are the facts: women represent 43 percent of the global agricultural workforce (FAO, 2023), but less than 15 percent of agricultural landholders are women (UN Women, 2018).

Global conventions have recognized this disparity and are calling for equality. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) decision at its fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) held that: [w]omen play an essential role in collectively managing land more sustainably, reducing biodiversity loss and mitigating and adapting to the effects of drought. This decision was echoed across the board, including by the Paris Agreement and the Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate, both of which recognized the need to respect, promote and consider human rights obligations such as ensuring gender equality and the socio-economic empowerment of women when taking action to address climate change.

It is only possible to tackle structural inequality, both at the local and country levels, through effective policy and tailored implementation actions. These include strengthening regional and national capacities to influence and co-design transformative policies, and creating an enabling environment in which gender-responsive policies and investments can thrive.

In 2021, FAO initiated the [WeCaN Nurturing Community of Knowledge Practice for Women](#) in dryland forests and agrosilvopastoral systems, a platform bringing together over 200 women's groups, civil society organizations, public institutions and practitioners. It is a space for them to collectively raise their voices and share ideas, opportunities and solutions through a South-South knowledge-sharing forum.

The WeCaN approach (Figure 1) supports women leaders to challenge unequal power structures, close gender gaps, and enhance women's engagement in climate processes. The aim is for our members to attain leadership roles with adequate power and responsibilities at local, national, regional and global levels, and enable more women to gain control of and access to natural resources, markets, funds, training, technical assistance, and technologies.



The 'three Rs'

The 'three Rs' emerge as common goals from the diverse range of promising practices adopted by WeCaN members who have spearheaded initiatives in their communities. Although these practices vary depending on country context, they all use gender-transformative approaches that have fostered inclusive development, enhanced women's roles and rights, and promoted sustainable land management methods.

Recurring themes in the practices that successfully led to the three Rs are: raising awareness on rights among women's groups; advocating for women's empowerment with diverse stakeholders; championing women's representation in decision-making processes; and ensuring the availability of efficient and sufficient technical and financial resources to promote women's leadership roles. These criteria are pivotal in bolstering women's representation and amplifying their voices at local, regional and global levels.

Promoting RIGHTS

In 2022, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) recognized that women, youth, Indigenous Peoples,

smallholders, pastoralists and other rural communities need special attention to ensure their equal access and control of land and natural resources. This is necessary because formal equality under the law – *de facto* gender equality – is not always sufficient to achieve gender equality on the ground due to social norms and perceptions about roles and rights (Kenney, 2022).

Similarly, large-scale advocacy and action on women's rights often take place globally; however, it may be challenging to feel the effects of these global efforts in practice at the local level. In some cases, civil society organizations are the driving force behind securing women's rights. They play a vital role in systematically supporting women's access to land, rights and education, and are key to strengthening women's meaningful engagement in public and political spaces from the ground up.

In order to effect tangible change, it is critical to reshape the narrative at the grassroots level. Encouraging women's active participation, providing education, funding opportunities and training, and ensuring their involvement in decision-making are essential steps to upholding women's rights in practice (FAO, 2021). By challenging cultural gender norms on traditional roles and responsibilities, a more empowering

environment is created for women to advance their rights within the local context. This lays the groundwork for gender-responsive policy advancement on a global scale. For example, in most dryland forest areas, women play an important role in many value chains of non-timber products. However, they often earn less than their male counterparts mainly because they have limited involvement in decision-making regarding sales, payments and re-investment decisions.

Several WeCaN members are actively empowering women to exercise their rights and are also advocating for modifications to existing discriminatory land laws.

Making rights more accessible through diverse media forms

For Mailes Zulu, knowledge of rights is the key to empowerment. In 2004, she founded the Save Environment and People Agency (SEPA) in her home country of Zambia, with the aim of challenging traditional norms that deprived women of their land rights by making information more accessible.

Mailes focused on simplifying complex legal language for the local population and traditional leaders. Using various media channels including radio, television and social media, she disseminated policy information to increase awareness of laws, and empower communities and women to assert their rights.

Mailes' organization also translated advocacy documents into native languages, provided advocacy training, and assisted women in gaining official recognition as citizens, resulting in hundreds of women legally owning their own land.

But she didn't stop at land rights; she also addressed environmental issues. Under her leadership, SEPA actively fought against deforestation and monitored resource use in Zambia's extractive industry, supporting projects that improved livelihoods while preserving the environment.

Driven by her commitment to gender equality, Mailes expanded her efforts to address women's health care and combat gender-based violence, collaborating with law enforcement and other regional organizations.

Increasing knowledge through education

Through education and awareness raising, Grace Scorey has played a pivotal role in transforming over 6 500 Maasai women pastoralists from passive observers into leaders in land rights and decision-making.

Working alongside the Pastoral Women's Council (PWC) in the northern region of the United Republic of Tanzania, a non-profit organization founded in 2007, Grace has worked to provide citizens with access to legal advice, ensuring that women understand and assert their rights in line with local and national policies. Involving the Women's Rights

and Leadership Forum (WRLF) and community paralegals, she has aided citizens in resolving cases of rights violations.

Grace has also successfully trained over 150 members of the WRLF on human and women's rights, legal provisions, land management laws and gender-based violence. These forums have led to community dialogues in six villages, enabling women to further their rights in the local context.

In 2022, Grace together with the PWC embarked on a collaborative effort with the Longido and Ngorongoro District Councils to support women pastoralists in acquiring land title certificates. This initiative resulted in 250 women gaining title deeds.

Grace's tireless dedication and unwavering commitment have led women pastoralists to become leaders in village councils and committees.

Strengthening REPRESENTATION

To create a gender-just future for all, multisectoral policies must be socially, economically and politically inclusive. For this to happen, women must be adequately represented at all levels.

At international fora, according to a BBC analysis (Stallard, 2022), women made up less than 34 percent of country negotiation teams at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) COP 27. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 28 percent of environmental ministers were women; in South and South-East Asia, 14 percent; in the MENA region, only 10 percent; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, only 7 percent (OECD, 2022).

To change this trend, it is important to understand the distinction between merely acknowledging women's needs in international and national plans and strategies, and effectively responding to them. Not all decision-makers or convention delegates are fully aware of the realities on the ground, including challenges that women encounter at the local community level. Often, they assume that their needs are evident from the data, but they may overlook the importance of directly consulting women and other minority and marginalized groups.

To bridge the gap between policy and reality, it is necessary that women and other local stakeholders who understand the situation on the ground are adequately represented at all levels. By monitoring women's participation in policy consultation processes and by building partnerships with women-led organizations, development actors and governments, global conventions can ensure the effective engagement of women representatives in high-level dialogues and investment fora.

Achieving genuine and equal participation of women and men in climate change decision-making processes is a vital step to ensuring that climate change policies effectively serve the needs of overall society (UNFCCC, 2020).



Several WeCaN members are implementing promising practices that support women to become community leaders and boost women's representation at all levels.

Creating safe spaces for women to hone their leadership skills

Since 1998, Thandiwe Chidavarume has played a central role in the Women and Land in Zimbabwe (WLZ) movement, which has fostered women's leadership through the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA).

The RWA began as a safe space where rural women could come together to discuss and strategize solutions for community issues, ranging from environmental and economic challenges to political and social obstacles. This approach allowed Thandiwe and other women to enhance their self-confidence, and hone their negotiation and leadership skills.

Over the years, Thandiwe and the RWA have coordinated advocacy and lobbying efforts that engaged over 2 000 women leaders across the country. Thandiwe has played a crucial role in guiding women involved in land rights lobbying, providing them with the necessary experience and support to stand on local committees.

Today, Thandiwe continues her impactful work by spearheading the development of a mobile application within the RWA to support rural women in advocating for leadership positions and achieving representation in public roles. She offers social media training for

women who aspire to take up leadership positions, enabling them to better mobilize and share information for collective advocacy actions.

Going global: taking the leap from local representation to national and regional

Dunia Baroud El-Khoury has played a pivotal role in upscaling women's leadership across rural communities in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley through the Women's Association of Deir El Ahmar (WADA).

In 1991, Dunia co-founded WADA with a group of rural women, and together they initiated the design of the first local development plan. They engaged with public institutions, local businesses and international partners, resulting in the successful implementation of capacity-building programmes focused on environmental conservation and food processing. Under Dunia's leadership, WADA opened the region's first centre for regional tourism.

Dunia and her team at WADA are deeply committed to both environmental conservation and economic sustainability in their local environment. Their efforts have not only inspired, but have also mobilized other women's groups in the region, gaining them recognition at both the national and international levels. Dunia and her team have become part of the Lebanese Council of Women and have collaborated closely with the National Commission of Lebanese Women.

After entering community, local and national climate change decision-making, Dunia has now had the opportunity to participate in climate change policy discussions under the UNCCD and UNFCCC Conventions. She has officially represented Lebanon, taking the opportunity to share her experience and those of other women's groups in her area, demonstrating their commitment to environmental conservation and sustainable development at a global scale.

Recognizing the need for diverse voices in climate action

Kenza Benmoussa has worked to actively mobilize young people and women during the UNFCCC's Twenty-sixth and Twenty-seventh Conference of the Parties. Drawing from her personal experience as a youth activist and Morocco's youth negotiator at climate conferences, Kenza is pushing for the meaningful involvement of youth and women in global efforts to address climate change.

Her approach began with gathering and training 100 women and youth, making sure that they understood the opportunities and procedures for gaining accreditation to UNFCCC and UNCCD Conventions. This foundation equipped young participants with the knowledge needed for effective engagement in global discussions.

Kenza also engaged with the Youth Advisors Council at the Ministry of Environment in Morocco to discuss the implementation of a programme for youth negotiators. This programme would work closely with the Minister of Environment at international events, amplifying the voices of women and youth in the climate arena.

Utilize RESOURCES

Equal and fair access to resources is vital to the achievement of gender equality. Inadequate access to resources and services restricts women to activities that require less capital and limits their ability to engage in more profitable tree-based and livestock enterprises. For example, while women dominate small-scale, non-traditional forest-product trading, men are more likely to own and manage larger and more lucrative businesses (FAO, 2023).

While financial resources are undoubtedly important, technical resources such as equipment, technologies and tailored training are equally critical. Without these essentials, women may struggle to access certain funding mechanisms or instruments effectively, hindering their ability to enter into business.

When resources are utilized effectively, it is easier for women to gain their economic, social and political independence. In doing so, they are more likely to access decision-making processes, engage in wider advocacy activities, and take on leadership roles.

Several WeCaN members are implementing promising practices that enhance women's access to and control over technical and financial resources.

Gender equality: a collective responsibility

Gender transformation should be a joint effort led by both women and men in order to realize benefits for society as a whole.

Hijaba Ykhanbai is at the forefront of driving community-based natural resource management in Mongolia and empowering women to lead conservation efforts in the face of climate change. Through his organization, the Environment and Development Association (JASIL), Hijaba works closely with pastoralist communities to enhance herders' rights and advocate for community co-management of pasturelands. Through his efforts, three pastoral communities led by women have earned recognition by the Global Registry of Indigenous People and Local Communities Conservation Area Network.

To improve women's representation in the decision-making process, Hijaba led JASIL in undertaking a ground-breaking social and gender analysis on natural resources management. The results were published as a book and distributed to all stakeholders, raising awareness of women's key role in pastoralism.

Hijaba and his organization are now exploring the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance pasture and resource management. He has actively engaged youth and women in pastoral land management using mobile phones, demonstrating his forward-thinking approach to conservation and community empowerment.

Women's knowledge as a key resource

Following her completion of a PhD in Agronomy at the University of São Paulo, Fernanda Monteiro chose to leverage her expertise for sustainable land management practices of Sempre-Vivas women.

The Southern Espinhaço region of Minas Gerais in Brazil is a global diversity hotspot and plays a pivotal role in preserving a unique and biodiverse savanna. The local women, called the Sempre-Vivas flower gatherers, are the unsung heroes behind this conservation effort. These women-led community groups have cultivated a remarkable expertise grounded in traditional knowledge and practices, ensuring food security by tending to diverse crops and collecting non-timber forest products, including medicinal plants and sempre-vivas flowers. They nurture over 90 crop species and undertake seasonal transhumance with cattle. Shared responsibilities and cultural traditions are instrumental for ecosystem rejuvenation, creating a profound sense of community identity.

The women's well-regarded expertise has given them opportunities to access government positions, including seats on public committees such as the Brazilian Federal and State Council of Traditional Peoples. In addition to being members of other civil society organizations, they are members of the Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia (National Agroecology Coalition). They have helped develop community protocols of good practices of biodiversity, soil and water

conservation, an instrument recognized by Brazilian biodiversity law as part of the Biodiversity Convention.

With Fernanda's technical assistance, Sempre-Vivas not only preserved the ecosystem, but also bolstered community food security, upheld cultural traditions and maintained an agro-biodiverse landscape by building upon traditional knowledge. The Sempre-Vivas women even campaigned for their system to be designated an FAO Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System, leading to wider cultural and political recognition by the local government through municipal laws.

A path forward

Further work is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and connections among the three Rs, but there are several conclusions that can be drawn to aid the creation of a path towards a more inclusive and fair society.

It's crucial to understand that women's participation alone is insufficient; it is essential to empower them with the knowledge skills, and capacity to advocate for their rights so that their participation is not only comprehensive, but also meaningful and representative of diverse segments of society.

Only when this level of participation is achieved can inclusive governance mechanisms be established and implemented. The case studies in this policy brief have several common factors that facilitate

women's leadership within the framework of the three Rs, which include the following:

» Honing leadership skills through safe discussion spaces

Establishing safe discussion spaces provides women with a platform to develop self-confidence, enhance their negotiation skills, and freely express their views at small gatherings. In the initial phase, women collectively brainstorm solutions to common community issues and develop concrete action plans.

Once these action plans are developed, they are presented to local authorities, who in turn acknowledge and appreciate the valuable contributions and solutions provided by women. This recognition serves as a stepping stone for women to become actively involved in decision-making processes. As they build a reputation at the local level, doors often open to opportunities for them to expand their impact and influence at the national and regional levels.

» Raising awareness on policy gaps and mobilizing collective advocacy

Simplifying legal language and disseminating policy information through mass media, including radio, television and social networks, have been instrumental in reaching a broader audience and enhancing advocacy knowledge among women. Similarly, to bridge gender learning gaps and foster more inclusive and impactful collective



advocacy strategies, it is essential to build partnerships with diverse stakeholders and leverage their technical expertise.

» Creating an enabling environment for female governance

Lastly, addressing gender equality in representation necessitates a multifaceted approach, which includes establishing clear lines of accountability, implementing quotas for female candidates, and enacting anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action policies. These combined measures work to challenge and change existing mindsets and behaviours, breaking down barriers and acknowledging women as equal members of communities entitled to equal rights in accessing opportunities within dryland governance.

WeCaN's Commitment

WeCaN recognizes women's unique knowledge of agroforestry techniques, including silvopastoralism, and the role their location-specific and gender-just solutions play in the prevention and mitigation of land degradation.

WeCaN fosters knowledge-sharing opportunities and best practices dissemination through the South-South channels. It boosts the negotiation and leadership skills of women leaders and supports them to become meaningfully engaged in climate change and dryland-related decision-making.

WeCaN's mission is to ensure gender justice and social inclusion in climate change management across dryland ecosystems, elevating the expertise of women to leadership positions, and creating a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

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WeCaN Nurturing Community of Knowledge Practice for Women in dryland forests and agrosilvopastoral systems is a platform to leverage women leaders' voices, agency and leadership for climate resilience and gender equality in the Global South.

WeCaN is designed to boost the negotiation and advocacy skills of women leaders to be fully and meaningfully engaged in national and international processes, and connect practices and policies through exchanges and knowledge sharing, learning opportunities and co-outlining advocacy actions. The WeCaN initiative covers thirty countries with over 200 members.

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